DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 381 027 FL 022 886

AUTHOR Wei, Jennifer M.
TITLE Representing Chineseness in New York City's Chinatown.
PUB DATE Mar 94
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Sociolinguistics Symposium (10th, Lancaster, England, United Kingdom, March 23-25, 1994).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cantonese; *Chinese; Contrastive Linguistics; Cultural Context; Cultural Differences; Diachronic Linguistics; Ethnography; *Ideography; Ideology; Immigrants; *Mandarin Chinese; Political Attitudes; Resistance to Change; Romanization; Social Change; *Sociocultural Patterns; Sociolinguistics; Standard Spoken Usage; *Written Language
IDENTIFIERS National Identity; *New York (New York Chinatown); Simplification (Language)

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the range of arguments and sentiments regarding the promotion and/or abolition of types of Chinese scripts. The written representations of Cantonese in Hong Kong, Mandarin in Taiwan as well as Mandarin in China are examined via issues of identity and of discourse both at national and international levels. Chinese scripts are socio-cultural artifacts whose coming into being historically represent a unique view to the understanding of Chinese modernity. Contested and contestable visions on how Chinese should be written or seen further attest to the politics of sentiments and ideologies lying behind the evolution of Chinese scripts. Writing Chinese is not just a linguistic act to translate the sound of Chinese to the graphic of Chinese. It is about how to represent Chineseness in a contested social context. The notion of homogeneity is challenged and it is argued that much of this kind of rationale from identifying the act of writing or seeing Chinese scripts or romanizations with an act of nationalism, traditionalism, or patriotism. Closer examination of how Cantonese is written vis-a-vis Mandarin and English further reveal much about the complex social and political tensions between "standard" Chinese and its linguistic others. (LR)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 381 027

Representing Chineseness in New York City's Chinatown

© Jennifer M. Wei 1994
Soochow University
Taipei, Taiwan

(Presentation at SS10 Sociolinguistics Symposium 10, Lancaster University, 23rd-25th March, 1994)

Abstract:

This paper aims to explore the range of arguments and sentiments regarding the promotion and/or abolition of types of Chinese scripts. The written representations of Cantonese in Hong Kong , Mandarin in Taiwan as well as Mandarin in China will be examined via issues of identity and of discourse both at national and international levels.

I see Chinese scripts as socio-cultural artifacts whose coming into being historically present a unique view to the understanding of Chinese modernity. The Chinese can be rationalized as an improvisation in an imaginative stage. For example, in New York City's Chinatown where the interactions between the actors and their spectators can be seen as live performance in which the characters are these new immigrants from Beijing, Hong Kong and Taipei. Their contested and contestable visions on how Chinese should be written or seen further attest to the politics of sentiments and ideologies lying behind the evolution of Chinese scripts. Thus, I argue that writing Chinese is not just a linguistic act to translate the sound of Chinese to the graphic of Chinese. It is about how to represent Chineseness in a contested social context. I challenge the notion of the homogeneity and the oneness of representing Chinese and argue that much of this kind of rationale from identifying the act of writing or seeing Chinese scripts or romanizations with an act of nationalism, traditionalism or patriotism. Closer examination of how Cantonese is written vis-a-vis Mandarin and English further reveal much about the complex social and political tensions between "standard" Chinese and its linguistic others.

FL022886

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Jennifer M. Wei

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Introduction:

The idea of conceptualizing writing Chinese as an act of cultural performance came to me when I was researching on Chinese language and identity in New York City. In my doctoral work in Chinatown, I was concerned with the translinguistic forces--economic and political-- constantly shaping the meaning of speaking and written Chinese. I was fascinated by how Chinese scripts were presented in various governmental paper work, and in types of street signs as well as in local newspapers and how the residents in Chinatown use the comments from each other's representation of Chinese in order to establish or abolish a relationship. My previous assumption in interpreting written Chinese as an objective linguistic act, transcribing sound to written symbol and seeing it as either in simplified or complex Chinese scripts were challenged by the diverse representations presented in a place such as New York City's Chinatown, where Chinese immigrants from the mainland, Hong Kong and Taiwan came thousands a week.

My ethnographic approach can be further illustrated by the field work I engaged in New York City. My daily teaching at the Chinese American Planning Council required a lot of writing on the blackboard to my middle-age male students from China and Hong Kong. My internship at the International Lady Garment Workers' Union as an English literacy instructor also demanded considerable time and energy performing an appropriate writing on various forms and documents such as filling out names, instructions and addresses. Writing Chinese in this social context is to offer an explanation, to provide information, as well as to represent who "we" are in the midst of confusion and uncertainty. Thus, it is not a mechanical encoding/decoding process, involving only the signified and the signifier, or the speaker and the hearer. What makes this linguistic transaction complicated is the dynamic cultural context, where the sight of Chinese scripts can be seen as a site for contested identities either at a national level or at an international level. It is a symbolic act in which a linguistic practice is both predicated by die-hard ideologies and challenged by its actors' changing eco-political experiences.

The following instance will further highlight the tensions and contentions in performing a Chinese script.

I was helping a student to fill out the form required by the CPC. As usual, I took the form from the office and asked her questions such name, address, ... "What's your name, last name first, please?"

Hsiao, Ya Chuang (as in Wade-Giles romanization)

蕭 亞 莊 (as in complex Chinese scripts)

"Oh! No. Not this way. You must be from Taiwan. My name is not written like this." She took the form back and filled it out herself.

Xiao, Ya Zhuang (as in Pinyin romanization)

萧 亚 庄 (as in simplified Chinese scripts)

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

I was shocked by her reactions to what I had written on the form. And I wasn't prepared to be castigated for the way I wrote Chinese. I had spent hours, months, years cultivating an elegant form of Chinese script and this woman reacted to my representation of her name-- *my writing and spelling*-- as if I had done violence to her. And, conversely, her reaction-- *"You must be from Taiwan."*-- sounded to me, in this context like an insult.

Chinese script, marks on paper, seem innocent enough, but the different ways of representing Chinese in writing have great symbolic weight, as the example illustrates. I had intended no "symbolic violence" to the woman I set out to help, nor, apparently had she intended any to me. Nonetheless, both of us had to put up with the consequences of our reactions to different Chinese scripts. Simple daily tasks such as filling out address, names, reading street signs, involve "writing" or "interpreting" Chinese on paper. It is not an objective linguistic exchange in which the linguists natively assume linear relationship between the hearer and the listener. It is a performative act: behavior shaped by the contingencies of the moment and their practical considerations. In Chinatown, what's more important than writing a form of Chinese is learning how this form allies you with, or sets you in opposition to, categories of people, for the community is complicated and rife with "ideologically weighted" tensions and contentions. Writing and seeing Chinese constitute much of how Chinese evaluate the notion of self and other. Chinatown is the essential heteroglossic context: many kinds of people with many ways of "writing" and "interpreting" Chinese, all of which *signify* far beyond the referential content of speech.

Predicments of the Chinese Scripts Reform:

The linguistic terms, "simplified " vs. "complex" characters are new terminology's in modern Chinese history. According to Ramsey (1987:85), the essence of performing Chinese scripts was not so much whether the number of strokes is complex or simple, but correct adherence to the sequences and exact number of how each stroke should be codified. The promotions of "simplified characters," according to DeFrancis (1984:259) was motivated in pat by the urgent need to develop a corps of literate cadres as lower-level bureaucrats, a need that it was thought could most expeditiously be met by such a forward-thinking reform. In so doing, the Chinese Communists aimed to expedite literacy for the peasants and workers who, at the time were the backbone of the Chinese Communist Party during the communization of the Chinese mainland in the 1940s and the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s. Writing Chinese in a simplified version symbolizes the liberation from the "corrupted bourgeois class," "the enemies of the people" and proclaim the progressive thinking of the CCP's leadership.

After the defeat by their communist counterparts in the 1949, the nationalist party carried out the cold war tensions with their emigration to Taiwan and continued its opposing socio-political ideologies by defending traditional Chinese scripts and other

forms of culture. The promotion of defending "authentic" Chinese traditions, language and culture was not only a counteract to the CCP's actions but also a defense against a series of socio-political set-backs from the international community, including the the withdraw of political representation from the United Nation in 1972 and the termination of the diplomatic relation with the United States in 1979. In addition to these international setbacks, the nationalist government had to face the contention from the Taiwanese who prior to the Nationalists' reclaim of Taiwan in 1949 had been through the Japanese colonization (1894-1945). Among the most sensitive issues were: the promotion of Guoyu (national language) as well as the abolition of writing or speaking Chinese "dialects," such as Taiwanese, Hakka in pubic which composed as the two most widely used languages by the people in Taiwan. By identifying Mandarin with nationalism, traditionalism and patriotism, the authorities in Taiwan not only transformed a linguistic minority into the "standard" language and consolidated the discontented local tongues but also created a standard of correct Chinese to facilitate the understanding for those who speak mutually unintelligible varieties of Chinese.

Returning to the example, the socio-political frame I adopted dictated the interpretations of a Chinese script. Thus, when I was swept by emotions in defending the usage of complex Chinese scripts, I was acting out "patriotism" and "traditionalism" according to the scripts prescribed by the authority in Taiwan. Conversely, the student at the CPC was acting out her part of "patriotism" and "nationalism" according to the scripts prescribed by the Chinese Communist Party. Given the animosity that still exists between the authorities in China and Taiwan, the issue of how Chinese should be represented is especially sensitive. Much of the politics of sentiment is illustrated by the example. Over the years, there have been various linguistic contexts between the two sides: the adoption of Pin-yin in place of the Wade-Giles system since the U.N.'s recognition of the Chinese Mainland and the ban of using simplified characters in Hong Kong and Taiwan. All these contests take the form of zero-sum games: if I win, you lose; if you win, I lose. If you are the "real Chinese," then who am I? If you write Chinese the "correct way," then my way is wrong.

Further Example Presented by the writing of Cantonese

The assertion of a unitary script can be politicized as the last example demonstrated. It can be further deconstructed by bringing out how "other" Chinese variety is represented. The next example will point out some of the complications of how Cantonese can be written vis-a-vis Mandarin and English in a social arena such as New York City's Chinatown.

In Hong Kong, as well as Macao, North America and Southeast Asia, forms of Cantonese are increasingly prevalent due to the large number of immigrants from the Guangdong province where Cantonese is the predominant communication vehicle. Among these Chinese communities, novel written forms are found in newspapers, popular magazines, street signs and personal communications. These written innovations have a basic Mandarin Chinese syntax, intermixed with Cantonese and/or English sentential or morphological components.

For example,

1. ng de gei-shi huei barbecue?
   we plural when go barbecue[1]?
   唔 D 幾時 會 barbecue? (in Cantonese script)
   我們什麼時候去烤肉? (in traditional Chinese[2] script)
   我们什么什候去烤肉? (in simplified Chinese script)

What can be read through these words are the different social worlds in which different kinds of Chinese adjust themselves and represent themselves in the midst of eco-political turnovers. The geographical separation of Hong Kong from the mainland and different socio-cultural patterns have relativized and deprivileged the official status of Mandarin. Since Mandarin, is still the standard form understood by the authorities in China and Taiwan, the creativity of Cantonese scripts can be threatening. Performing Cantonese scripts under this circumstances is not a neutral transgressing act of moving across linguistic boundaries. It is rather an improvisation, a socio-political adjustments to a constantly shifting playing field.

With the increasing cultural and economic ties between Beijing and Taipei, many restaurants and shops in China, especially in the areas where Taiwanese businessmen and tourists visit frequently, reportedly display signs to eschew the reformed writing system and use the traditional one, as if this will suggest "authenticity" and antiquity. A symbolic gesture prompted the analogy[3] with tea-shops in tourist spots in England, especially in historical towns, which carry signs calling themselves "Ye olde Englishe tea-shoope," as if the 16th century spelling will give them an air of antiquity.

Summary and Conclusion

---

[1] The first block of Cantonese characters represents the first person pronoun. The English letter "D" is used to represent the plural form, which is pronounced as "di" in Cantonese. The third block represents the word "when," pronounced as *géi-shi* in Cantonese. The forth block translates the English word "go" and is pronounced as *hwei* in Cantonese. The fifth group of letters, "barbecue," is borrowed from English.

[2] In my previous drafts, I habitually wrote "Chinese" when I meant Mandarin, an error I have reproduced here to remind myself and my readers how compelling this equation is for me. There are, indeed many different ways to represent written Chinese.

[3] I am grateful to Professor John Honey at the Osaka International University for providing me with this example.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

I have tried to demonstrate in this paper that writing Chinese or interpreting Chinese in a contested social context such as New York City's Chinatown can be conceptualized as how Chinese perform their social identities on paper. It is not just a linguistic act to translate the sound of Chinese to the graphic of Chinese. The diverse socio-political backgrounds from Chinese immigrants from Hong Kong and China constantly challenge the "homogeneity" of Chinese. Their contested visions on how Chinese should be written or should be interpreted further attested to the politics of sentiments and ideologies lie behind the evolution of Chinese scripts. The rhetoric of promoting Putonghua, Guoyu, simplified characters or traditional characters are not just objective positions in defense against Chinese nationality or modernity. They are arguments of how to conceptualize certain variety of Chinese as the language and to ensure its legitimacy with such supreme symbolic power as to constitute an inseparable element of Chinese national identity. The "oneness" of writing or interpreting Chinese is of course fabricated and much of its rhetoric is born out in defense against its political opponents or in response to the discontented linguistic others. The case of writing Cantonese vis-a-vis Mandarin and English by the immigrants form Hong Kong further pose challenge to authorities who believe in the autonomy in representing Chineseness.